



ACTIVITY TWO

READING *a* FILM

On one level, movies tell stories by portraying a sequence of events. Look a bit deeper, though, and it becomes apparent that casting, dialogue, production design, costumes, makeup, cinematography, editing, visual effects, sound, and music contribute much of the film's meaning and emotional impact.

Movies are a predominantly visual medium. That means viewers acquire a large amount of information from the way each shot, scene, and sequence looks. Sets, props, costumes, lighting, camera angles, and other visual elements provide crucial details about the characters and about the film's physical and temporal setting.

Costumes, makeup, and hairstyles convey information about characters' social status, personalities, and lifestyle. In *Erin Brockovich*, Erin, played by Oscar winner Julia Roberts, confronts a group of lawyers from a large legal firm. The lawyers, dressed in similar, dark-colored business suits, appear as a united and almost undifferentiated group. Erin's long, wild hair and flamboyant clothing, by contrast, set her apart from the corporate attorneys and emphasize the David vs. Goliath nature of her battle.

Color, line, shape, and composition within the picture frame suggest ideas and emotions. A cinematographer can subtly indicate a character's isolation or feelings of confinement by filming him through a window pane. In the film *Chinatown* (1974), production designer Richard Sylbert used white buildings for many of his locations to evoke the heat and dryness of Southern California's climate. Similarly, the monochromatic palette of *The Matrix* (1999) establishes a claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere.

Camera angles reveal characters' relationships to each other and their relative importance to the story. A character shot from below appears powerful and imposing, while one shot from above seems small or vulnerable. A closeup shot is intimate and revealing, and a wider shot places characters in a specific context. Off-center or skewed angles in movies like *Spellbound* (1945) can suggest mental disturbance. In a crowded scene, lighting and color direct the viewer's gaze where the director wants it. Filming a historical picture such as *Schindler's List* (1993) in black and white can make the subject seem more realistic than if it had been shot in lush color.

The camera may show a scene from the main character's point of view, as if the viewer were watching events through the character's eyes. A shift in the camera's point of view redirects the viewer's attention or suggests a new emotion. In the 1980 film *The Shining*, Danny (Danny Lloyd) tries to escape from his demented father, played by Jack Nicholson, through

a snowy maze. The camera shows the fleeing boy from behind; his chasing father is shot from the front. Because the two of them are never shown in the same frame, the viewer doesn't know how close the pursuer is to his prey, an effect which heightens the suspense.

Films are almost always shot out of sequence and later edited together to tell a logical story. The shots the editor chooses, and the ways they are combined, set the mood, develop the action, create a rhythm, establish the film's time and space, and guide the viewer's attention.



THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS maximized its thrilling racing sequences by using ramps to unexpectedly flip cars which would otherwise have crashed head-on, and it enhanced its soundtrack with engines that were much more dramatic than the sounds of the actual cars on screen.

In action films such as *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), the filmmakers use editing along with visual effects, stunts, sound, and music to create excitement and suspense throughout the picture. In one scene, an undercover policeman (Paul Walker) and a street-racer (Vin Diesel) race against an oncoming train. The editing sets a breathless pace, cutting quickly between the racers, their souped-up gear, flashing warning lights, and the train. The scene lasts longer on screen than the few seconds it would take in real life. The editing manipulates time and keeps viewers on the edge of their seats.

Dialogue, sound effects, and music enhance and ground a film's visuals. Dialogue helps identify characters and locations, develop plot points, reveal characters' personalities and motivations, create atmosphere, and support the film's theme or message.

In *Erin Brockovich*, for example, Erin uses direct, fiery language. Her passionate words are meant to sway viewers to her (and the filmmaker's) side. By contrast, the dialogue of the opposing lawyers makes it clear that they, and the company they represent, are the villains of the story.

Sound effects add realism, suspense, and even humor to scenes. Sometimes soundtracks include

recordings of the actual sounds of the objects on the screen. Other times, the sounds may be louder or softer than in real life or may be unrelated sounds that are more effective than the real thing. Sound editors and mixers may contrast sound and image or sound and silence to generate suspense or create a mood.

Using rhythm, tempo, melody, dissonance, and instrumentation, a film's music conveys mood, emotion, and character in ways that dialogue and imagery alone cannot. Dario Marianelli's Academy Award-winning score for the 2007 film *Atonement* incorporated the sound of typewriter keys to signify the obsessiveness of the main character. A pounding beat can generate excitement. Sharp, dissonant notes can be scary or disorienting. Music can also add to the emotional impact of a scene by playing against the onscreen images or being noticeably absent.

Show a scene from one of the movies mentioned above or from a film of your choice. Discuss the values and opinions expressed in the movie with your students. Have them consider casting, characters, point of view, dialogue, costumes, setting, visual effects, cinematography, editing, sound, and music. Ask your students how each craft contributed to the film's story, tone, emotions, characters, and positive or negative impressions.

EXTENDED ACTIVITY

Take one element, such as music, and have your students discuss it in greater detail. For example, you might ask the students what kind of instruments the composer uses and why. When does music play in the scene? When is it absent? How is the music different in different scenes? What does the score add to the film? For production design, you might ask the students how the look of the film creates mood and emotion. Are certain colors associated with certain characters or emotional states? What kind of objects can be found in each scene? How do they relate to the character, the time period, the genre, and the story? See past YMI Teacher's Guides (www.oscars.org/teachersguide) for additional ideas.

ACTIVITY THREE SUBJECTIVE *or* OBJECTIVE?

Part A. BIAS

Every viewer sees a film through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, beliefs, and value system. In other words, all viewers have a bias. A teenage viewer from a small rural village is likely to respond differently to a movie than an older viewer who lives in an urban area. Each ethnic group interprets stories from a distinct perspective. Certain

films may appeal more to religious viewers, while others attract young people on dates. Yet most viewers enjoy and understand a variety of films, including silent films, documentaries, and foreign language films that do not exactly reflect their own experiences.



The movies *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Save the Last Dance* (2001) are all stories about high school students. *Rebel without a Cause* and *Boyz N the Hood* both are set in Los Angeles, but the time period, social class, and racial makeup of the characters depicted are worlds apart. *Save the Last Dance* and *Boyz N the Hood* both take place in urban, predominantly black neighborhoods, but each has a different tone and a different message.

Contemporary teenagers might think that an older movie like *Rebel without a Cause* is not relevant to their lives, but the young characters in this film have the kinds of conflicts with their parents and peers that most young people will recognize.

Because they are the creation of a specific group of individuals, the media also have biases. This does not mean their messages must be discounted, only that consumers need to be aware of these biases in order to arrive at a deeper and clearer understanding of these messages.

As the media cover current issues, trends, and events, they influence viewers' attitudes toward these subjects. Movies, like other media, promote values and ideologies. While audiences expect serious films to contain some sort of message, even entertaining comedies like *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) or *Juno* (2007) reflect cultural values.

During World War II, women, by necessity, replaced men in the workplace. Movies from that period such as *So Proudly We Hail!* and *Madame Curie* (both 1943) depicted working women in positive ways. However, when American businesses needed to accommodate returning soldiers, movies began to emphasize the role of women at home. These images of women both echoed and reinforced what was happening in the larger society.

